Kami

Kami (Japanese: 神, [kaˈmi]) are the spirits or phenomena that are worshipped in the religion of Shinto. They can be elements of the landscape, forces of nature, as well as beings and the qualities that these beings express; they can also be the spirits of venerated dead persons. Many kami are considered the ancient ancestors of entire clans (some ancestors became kami upon their death if they were able to embody the values and virtues of kami in life). Traditionally, great or sensational leaders like the Emperor could be or became kami.[1]

In Shinto, kami are not separate from nature, but are of nature, possessing positive and negative, and good and evil characteristics. They are manifestations of *musubi* (結び),[2] the interconnecting energy of the universe, and are considered exemplary of what humanity should strive towards. Kami are believed to be "hidden" from this world, and inhabit a complementary existence that mirrors our own: *shinkai* (神界, "the world of the kami").[3]:22 To be in harmony with the awe-inspiring aspects of nature is to be conscious of *kannagara no michi* (随神の道 or 惟神の道, "the way of the kami")[2]

Though the word kami is translated multiple ways into English, no one English word expresses its full meaning. The ambiguity of the meaning of kami is necessary as it conveys the ambiguous nature of kami themselves.

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Etymology

Kami is the Japanese word for a god, deity, divinity, or spirit.[4] It has been used to describe mind (心霊), God (ゴッド), supreme being (至上者), one of the Shinto deities, an effigy, a principle, and anything that is worshipped.[5]

Although *deity* is the common interpretation of *kami*, some Shinto scholars argue that such a translation can cause a misunderstanding of the term.[6] The wide variety of usage of the word *kami* can be compared to the Sanskrit *Deva* and the Hebrew *Elohim*, which also refer to God, gods, angels, or spirits.

Some etymological suggestions are:

- *Kami* may, at its root, simply mean *spirit*, or an aspect of spirituality. It is written with the kanji 神, Sino-Japanese reading *shin* or *jin*. In Chinese, the character means *deity*.[7]
- In the Ainu language, the word *kamuy* refers to an animistic concept very similar to Japanese kami. The matter of the words' origins is still a subject of debate; several hypotheses about their similarities exist: the Japanese word was borrowed from the Jōmon/Ainu language, or are cognates of an extremely distant common ancestor.[8]

Amaterasu, one of the central kami in the Shinto faith

- In his *Kojiki-den*, Motoori Norinaga gave a definition of *kami*: "...any being whatsoever which possesses some eminent quality out of the ordinary, and is awe-inspiring, is called kami."[9]

Because Japanese does not normally distinguish grammatical number in nouns (the singular and plural forms of nouns in Japanese are the same), it is sometimes unclear whether *kami* refers to a single or multiple entities. When a singular concept is needed, *-kami* (神) is used as a suffix. The reduplicated term generally used to refer to multiple kami is kamigami.[3]:210–211

Gender is also not implied in the word *kami*, and as such it can be used to refer to either male or female. The word *megami* (女神), the use of female kami is a fairly new tradition.

History

While Shinto has no founder, no overarching doctrine, and no religious texts, the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters), written in 712 CE, and the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), written in 720 CE, contain the earliest record of Japanese creation myths. The *Kojiki* also includes descriptions of various kami.[3]:39

In the ancient traditions there were five defining characteristics of kami.[10]

1. Kami are of two minds. They can nurture and love when respected, or they can cause destruction and disharmony when disregarded. Kami must be appeased in order to gain their favor and avoid their wrath. Traditionally, kami possess two souls, one gentle (*nigi-mitama*) and the other assertive (*ara-mitama*); additionally, in Yamakage Shinto, kami have two additional souls that are hidden: one happy (*saki-mitama*) and one mysterious (*kushi-mitama*).[3]:130
2. Kami are not visible to the human realm. Instead, they inhabit sacred places, natural phenomena, or people during rituals that ask for their blessing.
3. They are mobile, visiting their places of worship, of which there can be several, but never staying forever.
4. There are many different varieties of kami. There are 300 different classifications of kami listed in the *Kojiki*, and they all have different functions, such as the kami of wind, kami of entryways, and kami of roads.
5. Lastly, all kami have a different guardianship or duty to the people around them. Just as the people have an obligation to keep the kami happy, the kami have to perform the specific function of the object, place, or idea they inhabit.

Kami are an ever-changing concept, but their presence in Japanese life has remained constant. The kami's earliest roles were as earth-based spirits, assisting the early hunter-gatherer groups in their daily lives. They were worshipped as gods of earth (mountains) and sea. As the cultivation of rice became increasingly important and predominant in Japan, the kami's identity shifted to more sustaining roles that were directly involved in the growth of crops; roles such as rain, earth, and rice.[10] This relationship between early Japanese people and the kami was manifested in rituals and ceremonies meant to entreat the kami to grow and protect the harvest. These rituals also became a symbol of power and strength for the early Emperors.[11] (See Niiname-sai (新嘗祭).)

There is a strong tradition of myth-histories in the Shinto faith; one such myth details the appearance of the first emperor, grandson of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. In this myth, when Amaterasu sent her grandson to earth to rule, she gave him five rice grains, which had been grown in the fields of heaven (Takamagahara). This rice made it possible for him to transform the "wilderness".[11]

Social and political strife have played a key role in the development of new sorts of kami, specifically the goryo-shin (the sacred spirit kami). The goryo are the vengeful spirits of the dead whose lives were cut short, but they were calmed by the devotion of Shinto followers and are now believed to punish those who do not honor the kami.[11]

The pantheon of kami, like the kami themselves, is forever changing in definition and scope. As the needs of the people have shifted, so too have the domains and roles of the various kami. Some examples of this are related to health, such as the kami of smallpox whose role was expanded to include all contagious diseases, or the kami of boils and growths who has also come to preside over cancers and cancer treatments.[11]

In the ancient animistic religions, kami were understood as simply the divine forces of nature. Worshippers in ancient Japan revered creations of nature which exhibited a particular beauty and power such as waterfalls, mountains, boulders, animals, trees, grasses, and even rice paddies. They strongly believed the spirits or resident kami deserved respect.

In 927 CE, the *Engi-shiki* (延喜式, literally, Procedures of the Engi Era) was promulgated in fifty volumes. This, the first formal codification of Shinto rites and *norito* (liturgies and prayers) to survive, became the basis for all subsequent Shinto liturgical practice and efforts. It listed all of the 2,861 Shinto shrines existing at the time, and the 3,131 official-recognized and enshrined kami.[12] The number of kami has grown and far exceeded this figure through the following generations as there are over 2,446,000 individual kami enshrined in Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine alone.[13]

Shinto belief

Kami are the central objects of worship for the Shinto faith. The ancient animistic spirituality of Japan was the beginning of modern Shinto, which became a formal spiritual institution later, in an effort to preserve the traditional beliefs from the encroachment of imported religious ideas. As a result, the nature of what can be called kami is very general and encompasses many different concepts and phenomena.

Some of the objects or phenomena designated as kami are qualities of growth, fertility, and production; natural phenomena like wind and thunder; natural objects like the sun, mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks; some animals; and ancestral spirits. Included within the designation of ancestral spirits are spirits of the ancestors of the Imperial House of Japan, but also ancestors of noble families as well as the spirits of the ancestors of all people, which when they died were believed to be the guardians of their descendants.[3]:150

There are other spirits designated as kami as well. For example, the guardian spirits of the land, occupations, and skills; spirits of Japanese heroes, men of outstanding deeds or virtues, and those who have contributed to civilization, culture, and human welfare; those who have died for the state or the community; and the pitiable dead. Not only spirits superior to man can be considered kami; spirits that are considered pitiable or weak have also been considered kami in Shinto.

The concept of kami has been changed and refined since ancient times, although anything that was considered to be kami by ancient people will still be considered kami in modern Shinto. Even within modern Shinto, there are no clearly defined criteria for what should or should not be worshipped as kami. The difference between modern Shinto and the ancient animistic religions is mainly a refinement of the kami-concept, rather than a difference in definitions.

Although the ancient designations are still adhered to, in modern Shinto many priests also consider kami to be anthropomorphic spirits, with nobility and authority. One such example is the mythological figure Amaterasu-ōmikami, the sun goddess of the Shinto pantheon. Although these kami can be considered deities, they are not necessarily considered omnipotent or omniscient, and like the Greek Gods, they had flawed personalities and were quite capable of ignoble acts. In the myths of Amaterasu, for example, she could see the events of the human world, but had to use divination rituals to see the future.

There are considered to be three main variations of kami: amatsu-kami (the heavenly deities), kunitsu-kami (the gods of the earthly realm), and *ya-o-yorozu no kami* (八百万の神, countless kami). ("八百万" literally means eight million, but idiomatically it expresses "uncountably many" and "all around"—like many East Asian cultures, the Japanese often use the number 8, representing the cardinal and ordinal directions, to symbolize ubiquity.) These classifications of kami are not considered strictly divided, due to the fluid and shifting nature of kami, but are instead held as guidelines for grouping them.[3]:56

The ancestors of a particular family can also be worshipped as kami. In this sense, these kami are worshipped not because of their godly powers, but because of a distinctive quality or virtue. These kami are celebrated regionally, and several miniature shrines (*hokora*) have been built in their honor. In many cases, people who once lived are thus revered; an example of this is Tenjin, who was Sugawara no Michizane(845-903 CE) in life.

Within Shinto it is believed that the nature of life is sacred, because the kami began human life. Yet people cannot perceive this divine nature, which the kami created, on their own; therefore, magokoro, or purification, is necessary in order to see the divine nature.[14] This purification can only be granted by the kami. In order to please the kami and earn magokoro, Shinto followers are

taught to uphold the four affirmations of Shinto.

The first affirmation is to hold fast to tradition and the family. Family is seen as the main mechanism by which traditions are preserved. For instance, in marriage or birth, tradition is potentially observed and passed onto future generations. The second affirmation is to have a love of nature. Nature objects are worshipped as sacred, because the kami inhabit them. Therefore, to be in contact with nature means to be in contact with the gods. The third affirmation is to maintain physical cleanliness. Followers of Shinto take baths, wash their hands, and rinse out their mouths often. The last affirmation is to practice matsuri, which is the worship and honor given to the kami and ancestral spirits.[14]

Shinto followers also believe that the kami are the ones who can either grant blessings or curses to a person. Shinto believers desire t appease the evil kami to "stay on their good side", and also to please the good kami. In addition to practicing the four affirmations daily, Shinto believers also wear *omamori* to aid them in remaining pure and protected. Mamori are charms that keep the evil kami from striking a human with sickness or causing disaster to befall them.[14]

The kami are both worshipped and respected within the religion of Shinto. The goal of life to Shinto believers is to obtain *magokoro*, a pure sincere heart, which can only be granted by the kami.[15] As a result, Shinto followers are taught that humankind should venerate both the living and the nonliving, because both possess a divine superior spirit within: the kami.[16]

Ceremonies and festivals

One of the first recorded rituals we know of is Niiname-sai,[11] the ceremony in which the Emperor offers newly harvested rice to the kami to secure their blessing for a bountiful harvest. A yearly festival, Niiname-sai is also performed when a new Emperor comes to power, in which case it is called Onamesai. In the ceremony the Emperor offers crops from the new harvest to the kami, including rice, fish, fruits, soup, and stew. The Emperor first feasts with the deities, then the guests. The feast could go on for some time; for example, the Showa Emperor's feast spanned two days.[11]

Itsukushima Shinto Shrine, Miyajima Island, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan. This shrine is believed to be where the kami dwell, and hosts many ceremonies and festivals.

Visitors to a Shinto shrine follow a purification ritual before presenting themselves to the kami. This ritual begins with hand washing, and swallowing and later spitting a small amount of water in front of the shrine to purify the body, heart, and mind. Once this is complete they turn their focus to gaining the kami's attention. The traditional method of doing this is to bow twice, clap twice and bow again, alerting the kami to their presence and desire to commune with them. During the last bow, the supplicant offers words of gratitude and praise to the kami; if they are offering a prayer for aid they will also state their name and address. After the prayer and/or worship they repeat the two bows, two claps and a final bow in conclusion.[3]:197

Shinto practitioners also worship at home. This is done at a *kamidana* (household shrine), on which an *ofuda* with the name of their protector or ancestral kami is positioned. Their protector kami is determined by their or their ancestors' relationship to the kami.[3]:28, 84

Ascetic practices, shrine rituals and ceremonies, and Japanese festivals are the most public ways that Shinto devotees celebrate and offer adoration for the kami. Kami are celebrated during their distinct festivals that usually take place at the shrines dedicated to their worship. Many festivals involve believers, who are usually intoxicated, parading, sometimes running, toward the shrine while carrying mikoshi (portable shrines) as the community gathers for the festival ceremony. Yamamoto Guji, the high priest at the

Tsubaki Grand Shrine explains that this practice honors the kami because "it is in the festival, the matsuri, the greatest celebration of life can be seen in the world of Shinto and it is the people of the community who attend festivals as groups, as a whole village who are seeking to unlock the human potential as children of kami."[2] During the New Year Festival, families purify and clean their houses in preparation for the upcoming year. Offerings are also made to the ancestors so that they will bless the family in the future year.

Shinto ceremonies are so long and complex that in some shrines it can take ten years for the priests to learn them.[17] The priesthood was traditionally hereditary Some shrines have drawn their priests from the same families for over a hundred generations.[18] It is not uncommon for the clergy to be female priestesses.[18] The priests may be assisted by *miko*, young unmarried women acting as shrine maidens.[19] Neither priests nor priestesses live as ascetics; in fact, it is common for them to be married,[18] and they are not traditionally expected to meditate. Rather, they are considered specialists in the arts of maintaining the connection between the kami and the people.[18]

In addition to these festivals, ceremonies marking rites of passage are also performed within the shrines. Two such ceremonies are the birth of a child and the Shichi-Go-San. When a child is born they are brought to a shrine so that they can be initiated as a new believer and the kami can bless them and their future life. The Shichi-Go-San (the Seven-Five-Three) is a rite of passage for five-year-old boys and three- or seven-year-old girls. It is a time for these young children to personally offer thanks for the kami's protection and to pray for continued health.[20]

Many other rites of passage are practiced by Shinto believers, and there are also many other festivals. The main reason for these ceremonies is so that Shinto followers can appease the kami in order to reach magokoro.[15]:205 Magokoro can only be received through the kami. Ceremonies and festivals are long and complex because they need to be perfect to satisfy the kami. If the kami are not pleased with these ceremonies, they will not grant a Shinto believer magokoro.

Notable kami

- Amaterasu Ōmikami, the sun goddess
- Ebisu, one of seven gods offortune
- Fūjin, the god of wind
- Hachiman, the god of war
- Inari Ōkami, the god of rice and agriculture
- Izanagi-no-Mikoto, the first man
- Izanami-no-Mikoto, the first woman
- Kotoamatsukami, the primary kami trinity
- Omoikane, the deity of wisdom
- Sarutahiko Ōkami, the kami of earth
- Susanoo-no-mikoto, the god ofsea and storm
- Tenjin, the poetry god
- Tsukuyomi, the moon god
- Raijin, the god of lightning, thunder and storms
- Ryūjin, the Japanese dragon god of sea and storms

In popular culture

See also

- Ainu religion
- Anito, similar nature deities and spirits in the Philippines
- Animism
- Geist
- Genius loci and Numen, similar concepts of ancient Rome
- Glossary of Shinto

- Kamuy
- Koshintō
- Kotodama
- Landvættir, similar natural and spiritual beings in Norse religion
- List of Shinto *kami*
- Mana
- Pneuma
- Religion in Japan
- Ryukyuan religion

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External links

- Introduction: Kami, Encyclopedia of Shinto
- *Kami*, Gods of Japan
- Evolution of the Concept of Kami, Itō Mikiharu

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